

Community Engagement: Challenges & Tools from the Planner's Perspective

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Planning practitioners “plan” to improve the quality of life for people in the communities in which they live. To carry out this task effectively, we must work to engage the public in our plans and facilitate stakeholder participation in tailoring decisions to most appropriately address the needs of a given community. Though highly important, this component of the planning process seems to be one of the most challenging. Discussions surrounding engagement are simply incomplete. Little work has focused on the identification of the factors that make engagement difficult or ways to mitigate the generally negative sentiments that practitioners and community members alike have toward public outreach. This study seeks to highlight common challenges as identified by planners involved in community engagement in Atlanta and offer insights for the improvement of our methods and, consequently, the outcomes of our planning processes.

Literature Review

The Importance of Community Engagement

“Our primary obligation is to serve the public interest, and we, therefore, owe our allegiance to a conscientiously attained concept of the public interest that is formulated through continuous and open debate [...] We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence” (APA, 2009). These words are among the first lines of the American Institute of Certified Planner’s Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. These words, standards that American planners strive to meet on a daily basis, demonstrate a generally accepted expectation that planners engage residents in the planning process. While the direction is, indeed, present, our Code of Ethics fails to define the engagement process or its extent.

The importance of public engagement goes beyond the necessity of completing a benchmark. Indeed, many suggest that this element of the planning process is the most basic right afforded to those living in a democratic society (Arnstein, 1969; Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Wadsworth, 1997). Engagement in planning is an important opportunity for stakeholders to voice opinions and reconcile competing perspectives. In addition to the benefits for stakeholders, community engagement also holds a particular importance for those leading the planning process. The element of engagement prevents the confusion and setbacks that occur when decision leaders are blindsided by unexpected public opposition after the planning process is complete (Arnstein, 1969; Carpini et al., 2004; Wadsworth, 1997).

Definition and Forms of Community Engagement

When the terms “community engagement” or “citizen participation” are included as elements in the work plan for a project, planners and other leaders may assume that they know exactly what is in store. They might picture an evening in which they present their ideas and

progress to a small group of interested residents and stakeholders, take notes on comments, feedback, and questions, and move on. In fact, Deborah Wadsworth asserts that, in her experience, professionals really have little idea of what public engagement actually means (Wadsworth, 1997). Wadsworth writes that we must remember that “public engagement is not the art of avoiding public participation by restricting policy making to experts and leaders,” nor “simply keeping people informed,” nor “a sales effort designed to convince others to believe as the experts do.” She reminds readers that community engagement is more than just another step toward the completion of a project. It is the meaningful, active involvement of key stakeholders in the decision-making process as it relates to real outcomes.

In her regularly quoted article, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” Sherry Arnstein is even bolder as she argues that this type of stakeholder empowerment should create “citizen power”(Arnstein, 1969). In fact, community engagement should be the redistribution of power from the leaders of any given project or program to the people that will be directly affected by its outcomes.

Successful Engagement. Of course, with any discussion of citizen participation comes the necessity to discuss the distinction between the effort itself and its success. Arnstein points out that there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and facilitating the creation of the real power needed to affect the result of the process (1969). While this distinction is an important one, Michael Carpini and his colleagues in the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Pennsylvania argue that the success of engagement processes is, in reality, too difficult to assess with any validity because of the difficulty of gathering empirical evidence (Carpini et al., 2004). The absence of anything more than questions regarding the extent and success of citizen participation reinforces Carpini’s assessment.

The Good, The Bad, The Difficult

One of the things that authors engaged in discussions about citizen participation do often speak of is the existence of distinct positive and negative aspects of engagement for both stakeholders and decision leaders. Historically, this type of participation has been held up as the highest form of citizenship (Day, 1997). The literature tends to highlight the idea that the community engagement process is a chance for community members to gather, communicate with one another, and bring themselves up to date with happenings in the neighborhood. In fact, the process may work best when participants share underlying common interests and social bonds (Carpini et al., 2004). These gatherings allow for the discussion that helps to shape individual political opinions and build bonds among community members. Ideally, participation in a communal decision-making process will result in a stronger community and social ties (Day, 1997).

The more detrimental consequences of this increased communication for communities and stakeholders are also prevalent in the literature. Carpini et al. assert that much of the activity

surrounding citizen participation is simply political talk with no real outcomes (2004). They point out that participation is usually linked to socioeconomic status and education and that the voices that are accounted for may not be a cross-section of the interests at stake. Additionally, an open sharing of thoughts and opinions may exacerbate differences rather than ameliorating them or facilitating consensus (Day, 1997). Further, some say that engagement activities may highlight feelings of inadequacy in would-be participants who know that they do not have time to properly educate themselves on the issues at hand. They may not feel qualified to participate and know that they cannot compete with the professional planner in terms of knowledge (Carpini et al., 2004).

Comments regarding the less appealing features of community engagement initiatives for planner are perhaps the most prevalent in the existing literature. As Arnstein famously writes, “The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you” (1969). She is suggesting that professionals generally have a distaste for the public engagement element but that they generally follow through without too much fuss because there is an agreement that stakeholder participation is necessary for planning to retain its legitimacy. For what reasons might this sentiment hold true three decades later? Day lists possible explanations, including the difficulty of inviting and gathering true representation, the lack of informed stakeholders, the appearance of misinformed participants, and a widespread fear of change and uncertainty among those affected by forthcoming plans (2004). In the end, Day suggests, there is an intrinsic distrust that appears in all parties involved. Planners are suspicious of the ability of the masses to lend constructive contributions and govern selves appropriately. Stakeholders often do not trust that facilitator and decision makers truly have their best interests in mind (2004). For these reasons, consensus and sound judgment seem nearly impossible.

Specific Barriers Associated with Community Engagement. Other researchers have pinpointed specific factors that contribute to the development of opinions regarding public engagement. For example, Dr. Margaret Wilder of the University of Delaware’s School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy blames an implicit disconnect. She states that where meaningful engagement is perhaps the most important, or in traditionally marginalized communities, participation is made more difficult by alien social systems that planners may not fully understand without education and time-consuming immersion into the community (Wilder, 2001).

Most depressingly, Benevise asserts that citizen participation is the “Achilles heel” of planning – arguing that it is one of the most difficult responsibilities, but that, unfortunately, initiatives cannot succeed without some form of participation (Benevise, 1977).

What Tools are Available to Alleviate the Negativity?

Day suggests that public engagement might be characterized as a wicked problem in planning: its obstacles run in vicious circles, resulting in further confusion among planners as to

what it looks like in practice and the extent of participation that is really necessary (2004). So how do we begin to identify the underlying causes of these negative factors and move toward making this crucial activity more useful – and, perhaps, enjoyable – for everyone involved?

Tools for Creating a Framework and Approach. Many authors have outlined guidelines that they suggest may help the planners and facilitators of engagement events. For example, Wadsworth lists seven tips to assist facilitators as they think about how to engage with the community. These include instructions to listen, maintain persistence, and to communicate clearly in simple language (Wadsworth, 1997). Organizations also compile these sorts of tools. Publications like the Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium’s “Principles of Community Engagement” provide extensive guidance for “successful” engagement and examples of initiatives that have employed similar approaches (CDC, 2011).

Others suggest that planners focus on a connection to place (Manzo & Perkins, 2006), creating an understanding of the sociopolitical context in which they are operating. These authors highlight the idea that people have psychological ties to place: “Residents’ ability and willingness to address local problems are influenced by their emotional commitment to their community places.” Disruptions to attachments cause strong emotional reactions. When planners appeal to that sense of community, positive outcomes are more likely to appear.

Technology Tools. A current trend among those interested in the improvement of public engagement is the exploration of the intersection of citizen participation and technology. Discussion regarding technology in the planning process asserts that new methods are not only more convenient for both the professional and the stakeholder, but that they are becoming necessary in processes seeking to achieve full engagement (Foth, Klæbe, & Hearn, 2008).

Carpini asserts that Internet forums and chat rooms blend advantages of face to face discussion with scale and convenience of modern technology (Carpini et al., 2004). Al-Kodmany provides suggestions for the use of visual tools, including GIS, sketching, and computer photo manipulation. He points out that planners should use sound judgment when deciding which of these methods is appropriate for different levels of participation process (Al-Kodmany, 1999). Coleman defends use of online collaboration tools in moderation and mediation. Aspects included in this work include email, instant messaging, mailing lists, forms, chat rooms, and linear bulletin boards (Coleman & Gotze, 2001).

Technology is not used just for communicating with stakeholders; it may also provide an avenue for new deliverables. Klæbe et al. highlight the relatively new practice of digital storytelling, which allows participants to create anecdotal reminiscences using audio-visual clips. When taken collectively, an important story tends to emerge (Klæbe, Foth, Burgess, & Bilandzic, 2007).

While technology may be used to achieve important results, downsides to the use of these methods also exist. Rowe and Gammack outline the potential drawbacks of the use of technology

for public engagement purposes. These difficulties include limited access for low income or isolated populations and questioning regarding the validity of the results from technology-based practice (Rowe & Gammack, 2004).

There is no shortage of literature that alludes to the issue of public engagement. Most authors agree that engagement is a necessary process that should improve the outcome of any project. However, there is a tone that exists in this literature that suggests that there is a less attractive element to public engagement and little consensus as to the reasoning behind this assessment. There is surprisingly little in-depth discussion on these less appealing aspects of the engagement concept and even less empirical research to determine what causes less eager attitudes. Arnstein’s sentiments are often quoted, but the question at hand is why should citizen participation be equivalent to spinach and not chocolate? What can be done to improve the planner’s relationship with this element that is necessary for the successful completion of his or her job description.

This study seeks to understand the explicit and implicit reasoning behind negative sentiments toward the public engagement process and suggest tangible tools to address these attitudes.

Methodology

To discover the source of discomfort with the topic of public engagement, I conducted interviews with practitioners in the City of Atlanta. These interviews were set up via email and held over the phone. A total of nineteen interviews were completed.

The interview questions were developed in an effort to guide conversations in a direction that would address how Atlanta planners view the public engagement element of the planning process, including how it is carried out within their individual organizations and in the city at large. While the first few questions ask the interviewee to consider a single engagement process or event in their careers, most of the inquiry requires participants to explore their overall perspectives of the planning profession.

Snowball sampling was used to gather participants for this study. The first practitioners who were invited to participate were colleagues and acquaintances. Each of the initial participants were asked for suggestions for additional planners in the Atlanta area that had organized or facilitated an engagement process or event in connection with a planning development. All of the practitioners who agreed to involvement in the study were interviewed and included in the results.

The interviews were conducted by a single researcher and led in a loosely structured format. While I had a list of questions in hand to guide the interaction, I allowed the participant to carry out the majority of the talking and lead the direction of the conversation, following up with additional questions and probes only when necessary.

When the nineteen interviews were complete, notes were compiled and the results were entered into a table organized by question. This chart was used to simplify responses and identify themes within the results.

Results

Of the nineteen practitioners interviewed for this study, seven work in the public sector. These planners include city and county employees. Nine work with private planning and real estate development firms or consulting firms. Three work with foundations and nonprofits that do not fall under the public or private sector categories.

To open the interviews, participants were asked to think about the most recent project they had worked on that included a public engagement component. Of the projects discussed, four were regional planning projects, dealing with upcoming legislation or large-scale development projects. These processes required the involvement of the largest number of stakeholders and interests. Three of the planning processes discussed in the interviews were municipal projects involving the organization of citywide master plans. The remaining twelve projects were site-specific development efforts and focused largely on neighborhood-level engagement initiatives. I then asked practitioners to discuss the engagement tools and general approaches used in the outreach and public participation element of their projects. Each of the projects included more than a single type of engagement, and the approaches discussed ranged widely. Seventeen of the projects used traditional public meetings to engage the public. Nine used interactive workshops or charrettes. Six of the projects required planners to organize steering committees, task forces, or advisory boards. Four of the planners discussed engaging stakeholders through small group meetings, often referred to as focus groups. Three respondents talked about their experiences with interviewing key stakeholders. Three of the projects included paper and online surveys. Four of the practitioners had canvassed their study areas, holding informal conversations with residents and business owners on the street and in public places. One of the projects involved an effort to engage neighbors in a site plan by providing training for related job skills. Finally, just nine of the respondents mentioned the use of any sort of technology (websites, social media, etc.) in their public engagement process.

The next set of questions led respondents to talk about their individual feelings and attitudes toward the planning processes in which they had taken part, both specific to the projects discussed previously and more generally in their careers. Twelve practitioners responded in an overall positive manner. Three responses were markedly negative in nature. Four respondents were careful not to include any strong feelings in their responses and changed the subject fairly quickly.

Often, questions regarding attitudes toward public engagement led respondents to the

topic of challenges naturally. However, those who did not begin to talk about the obstacles that they had experienced were asked directly what barriers or challenges surfaced in the public participation element. Eight practitioners cited attendance as a major challenge, referring to issues in marketing engagement opportunities. On a similar note, six respondents discussed problems in scheduling events. Both time and location were mentioned as obstacle to these gatherings. Seven respondents discussed challenges regarding diversity, recognizing that a wide variety of interests are involved in an planning project and the fact that it is often difficult to not only bring representatives of all of those interests to the table, but also that paying proper attention to the diverse interests that are already involved is problematic. Six of the practitioners referred to the task of keeping discussions on topic and relevant to the current planning process when talking about major challenges. These respondents often expressed a fear of wasting the time of both the planner and the participants. Six respondents also discussed difficulties with managing the expectations of the public for the project and the ability of the planner to create change in their communities. Seven of the practitioners shared problems with the history of planning in the city of Atlanta and obstacles involving the preconceived notions and expectations of the planning profession. Similarly, twelve people cited negative attitudes among participants as a major obstacle in the engagement process. Nine of the interviewees expressed concerns with resources, both financial and human. Six of the respondents noted bureaucratic restraints as major barriers to true public engagement, expressing concerns about the representative roles that they play. Four of the practitioners talked about issues with technology that included concerns about general hesitancy with employing technological methods in the engagement process and the limited skillsets of planners whose projects might benefit from these tools.

Finally, respondents were asked to think about the overall approach to public participation in the city of Atlanta. Two respondents had only positive comments about the engagement methods that they had witnessed. The responses of sixteen of the interviewees were clearly negative. One of the respondents remained neutral on the subject.

Discussion

It appears that we, as planning practitioners in the city of Atlanta, believe that we are doing an acceptable job of engaging residents and the general public in our projects. However, there is a marked recognition of the challenges that community participation presents and the opportunity for improvement in those areas. The major challenge areas identified through the present conversations with Atlanta planners were:

- Public perception;
- Event logistics;
- Participation structure;

- Technology; and
- Evaluating success

By exploring the elements of the engagement process identified by the planners as challenges and the explanations behind them, we can better understand how we might go about addressing them and improving our approach.

Challenges in Public Perception

Atlanta, according to many of the practitioners involved in these conversations, has a history of creating the proverbial “plan on the shelf.” We have often gotten exceedingly excited about projects and revitalization efforts, studied the affected areas, asked the necessary questions, and then failed to see the initiative through to implementation. Generations of Atlanta residents have been involved in the creation of these plans, and generations have taken note of the ultimate inaction. The resulting aversion to participation in new planning processes has manifested itself as a general attitude among Atlanta residents that practitioners have cited as a significant barrier to effective engagement.

One interviewee working on the design of a neighborhood-level site plan explained, “Stakeholders are apprehensive – especially if they have seen many people come into their neighborhoods asking the same questions without seeing results.” The expectation that history will continue to repeat itself leads potential engagement participants to make assumptions about the planner, the process, and the eventual outcome. Because of the presumption that the project will not go anywhere, the public refuses to get involved. They fear that this process will be yet another waste of valuable time.

Other planners have stressed the importance of short-term success in maintaining focus and dedication to a project. Finding the “low hanging fruit” or more feasible needs within a community to address and complete early in the project period shows stakeholders that leaders and planners are serious about their dedication to the cause and may persuade them to become more involved in future projects.

Another topic of concern that presented itself repeatedly in the interviews was the legacy of misguided intentions left by the planners of the past. The overwhelming feeling was that, especially in areas characterized as “disadvantaged,” residents have their guard up. Another practitioner explained that, in her experience, people expect that community meetings will just feature another consultant “cramming completed ideas and pretty pictures down their throats.”

A few of the practitioners that I spoke with shared significant reflections on the topic of public attitude. One boiled the problem down to an issue of trust – trust in the project, trust in the intentions and methods of the planner, and trust that participation will have a direct impact on the outcome of the project. She said that without that trust, planners “do not have a chance” to bring the public into their projects or to engage them in any meaningful way.

Another suggested that to start to mend this relationship between the practitioner and the public, “planners need to be seen working with the community as a way to strengthen the Achilles heel, which is that we are in the business of making plans that do not go anywhere.” Yet another respondent concluded that being invited in to the community is, by far, the most important component in ensuring a strong public participation. Those communities who feel as though they are leading the process simply have more trust in the planners that they hire.

The perceptions and attitudes of those stakeholders that do decide to engage in the planning process were also mentioned repeatedly as barriers for planners in organizing and conducting participation initiatives. There are those individuals and groups who disapprove of the profession altogether. One interviewee recounted an encounter with an Agenda 21 group and revealed how jarring it was to have an organized group of people question her personal decision to be a planner as well as the work in which she was involved at that time. She said that, luckily, she had the personality to acknowledge the group respectfully and in a calm manner. Because of her demeanor, she said, the group agreed to participate in the meeting in the same fashion as the other parties involved.

“We need to do a better job of marketing our profession and intentions. We need to document our work and tell our story better. We must document our outreach efforts and their incorporation into the final product.”

Insights from the Field: On Addressing the Community Perspective

Other confrontations involve stakeholders who are simply dissatisfied with the project at hand and/or the way in which it has been addressed. Often, parties perceive that their voices have been ignored by the process and feel as though they must raise their voices and cause an event in order to have their opinions acknowledged. Many practitioners, especially representatives of the public sector, alluded to this type of interaction as the least favorable aspect of their jobs. These planners had a common phrase along the lines of: “To do this job, you must have thick skin.” When prompted to explain what they meant by this conclusion, respondents regularly shared stories in which they learned that it is not uncommon for the public to be unhappy with planning processes, and that individuals often handle their dissatisfaction by attacking the representative of the entity in charge. “It is all about developing thick skin. You have to remember that it’s not personal,” said one planner. “It is all just part of the job.”

From the conversations about engagement and public perspective, I gathered that two characteristics of the individual planner are important: personality and attitude. Some practitioners questioned whether every person in the planning profession was “cut out” to interact with the public. Others held the position that people who did not interact with the public had “no business calling themselves planners,” suggesting that this element of the project is part of the job description. It was those of the latter frame of mind that insisted that successful engagement with the public, especially with those stakeholders that are not happy with the planning process,

requires experience and practice. “It’s a muscle,” claimed one planner. “You get better the more you use those skills.”

The attitude of the planning practitioner toward the engagement process is an interesting subject, and some may question whether this topic is relevant to the success of engagement. The notion that the planner’s disposition is key in good community engagement draws attention to whether we, as planners, are interested more in completing this segment of the process and moving on or in ensuring that the outcome of the participation effort is meaningful and of high quality.

Challenges in Event Logistics

A task commonly delegated to the planning practitioner is the organization of community engagement events. The logistics of completing the event planning element of their jobs effectively was another one of the most widely discussed obstacles in this set of interviews. The pressure to produce quality events was palpable among the planners, as was their frustration with the ordeal.

Because attendance was the most common metric for success among the planners included in this study, the major challenge related to event planning was getting people to actually come to events. Planners recognize the difficulties of enticing the public to donate time to a cause outside of their work or their families, and they struggle to accommodate various needs and increase the convenience of their events.

“Sometimes we, as planners, have to go to the people. We have to pound the pavement and engage people on their terms. We can’t always have them come to us..”

Insights from the Field: On Engaging the Entire Community

The trouble starts, according to these planners, with scheduling. Many of the respondents explained that while they understand that finding a time that works for everyone is nearly impossible, they often cannot find a time that fits in the schedule of even the majority.

The next issue is in ensuring that the event is accessible to the populations involved and that those individuals are mobile enough to attend. A few planners explained that they routinely offered rides to their events. Others recounted how they have, in the past, chosen the location for their event based on their least mobile stakeholders. One firm planning changes in a major intersection in a metropolitan Atlanta city held an engagement meeting in a senior center nearby to ensure that the oldest of the residents had the opportunity to attend. Another organization working with a neighborhood to develop a community visioning plan held meetings and workshops in the local school and invited students to participate, thereby extending an intentional invitation to families with school-aged children.

Planners also find it exceedingly difficult to persuade stakeholders with young children to attend their events after hours. While some of these practitioners have begun to offer childcare

at their meetings and workshops, others lament at the cost that this sort of service presents. Despite these offerings, persuading parents to sacrifice time normally spent with their children remains a serious challenge.

For many of these practitioners, the resources required to make these accommodations were simply beyond the means of their projects. However, there are a number of planners who recognize that not all community engagement has to take place in a church or community center. There is a great deal to be said about the planner who is willing to leave the relative comfort of an organized, scheduled meeting to go into the community, seeking conversations with the various stakeholders in their project.

Challenges in Participation Structure

When planners are able to get past the assumptions of their stakeholders and plan their event for a place and time that enables people to actually attend, they must then concern themselves with the way in which they seek to receive the input and participation of the public. The challenges highlighted by the practitioners involved in this study as they related to the structure of the participation element of their projects included tailoring their approach to the needs of varying ages and income ranges, keeping their stakeholders engaged in the process, and ensuring that participation remains meaningful and constructive.

“We cannot just talk to the old people, especially if it’s a long-term vision. We need more youth!”

Insights from the Field: On Age & Engagement

Many of the planners interviewed for this review were interested in involving people from every background in their projects. However, there was widespread uncertainty as to the adjustments that need to be made when interacting with the old, the young, the very

young, the wealthy, and the poor. While some found new engagement tools, including technology and social media, to be the best bridge among these groups, others were less optimistic about the impact that they expected these tools to make among their stakeholders. One interviewee commented: “It’s easy to get caught up with the flashiest thing – which is fine; however, we need also to keep the traditional in mind. We have a very large affected population with varying needs.” He suggested that while technology had the potential to work well in this process, he did not believe that it should be used as a fix-all for engaging every stakeholder group.

As an additional concern of the planner in structuring a participation plan, many practitioners discussed the obstacle of keeping people engaged in the project. This barrier, according to those individuals with which I spoke, is a matter of managing community expectations of the project, focusing the scope of the discussion, and explaining the importance of long-term planning.

A majority of the practitioners expressed a deep frustration with the expectations that the public

generally has for a new plan or development project. Often, it seems, stakeholders perceive a given project to be a “fix-all” for their neighborhood or city. Planners are spending a significant amount of time in clarifying the boundaries of their projects and explaining that there are limits as to what they, as a planner, or the project on which they are working can do to alleviate the myriad of hardships that stakeholders face. When stakeholders hear this response, they tend to get angry or become entirely uninterested in the project at hand.

As a related challenge, a number of the planners, especially those working in the public sector, spoke about the time spent fielding questions entirely unrelated to the topic at hand. They often felt bombarded and unprepared to address the questions that they were receiving. Again, those participants who expected to hear answers to issues outside of the scope of the project become markedly uninterested in the true subject of the outreach event.

Finally, there was uncertainty concerning how to keep people focused on long-term planning projects when there are so many problems that need to be addressed in the short-term. Many of the planners explained that it is difficult to maintain the interest of stakeholders when there is no promise of tangible results in the near future – no “catalyst” to inspire continued participation.

“Cater your participation plan to the community – are they traditional or a little more wacky? Be sure to pull the right tools out of your planner basket.”

Insights from the Field: On Tailoring Engagement Plants

Beyond all else, planners are worried about wasting time. They are working, primarily, to not only avoid the misuse of their own time, but also with respect to that of the stakeholders who have agreed to participate in their projects. They seek to find the most effective ways to deliver the best, most up-to-date information to stakeholders and to engage them in a meaningful way within the financial and capacity restraints of their organizations. These wishes combine to create a task that is associated with more questions and ambiguity than answers and concrete methods.

Challenges in Technology

A popular subject when discussing challenges was the use of technology in community engagement and outreach efforts. The technology tools discussed included websites, online surveys, social media, and other modeling software. There was disagreement regarding technology’s place in engagement, its usefulness, and the difficulty involved in incorporating these methods into the process. Overall, there were a significant number of planners who indicated that they did not feel that technology was appropriate in most cases, but there were also those that were adamant about the inclusion of these tools. One planner summarized this set of sentiments as he said, “As we look forward to the challenge of reaching more diverse populations, we have to realize that engagement is shifting beneath our feet. We need to

explore and understand the best way to use technologies, including social media and mobile applications.”

By far the most cited challenge associated with the use of technology in community outreach and participation was the issue of accessibility, especially for lower wealth and older populations. Many respondents indicated that attempting to navigate what groups have computers, access to the Internet, or phones and are able to utilize them regularly is simply too large a task for planning organizations. There was one planner who listed the times that her firm had attempted to use technology and met backlash for the effort, particularly from the seniors involved in the projects. This practitioner and her team have since shied away from spending resources on online surveying and interactive websites. She laughed as she said, “Older people are simply stuck in their ways. Perhaps it will be different in the future.”

However, for every story of failure to incorporate technology, there was certainly one of the successful use of these methods. One planner with a private firm designing changes in a major intersection of a metropolitan Atlanta city recounted a situation in which his team was gathering comments and other input from the members of a nearby senior citizen center. The proposal on the table was the incorporation of a traffic circle to make the intersection safer for pedestrians. Traffic circles are difficult to understand without prior knowledge of the engineering tool. The planners in this firm were able to prepare themselves to explain the concept by creating a visual explanation through the use of modeling software, which they displayed on a large screen in the senior center. The practitioner said that he believed that his team was able to explain the benefits of a traffic circle more effectively to an audience that may have otherwise been likely to disapprove of the change.

As was highlighted by many of the planners who talked about technology in their responses, the ultimate challenge in including the use of websites and social media in the engagement process is ensuring that they remain relevant. We must require that these tools be specific to the project and that their use does not become too generic.

Challenges in Evaluating Success

When the engagement event or outreach initiative is over, it is natural for planners to evaluate their work and try to determine their impact on the project and its stakeholders. How does a planner conclude that his or her outreach has had a positive impact? In fact, a primary challenge area on the planner’s part seems to be in defining success in public engagement. When asked if they thought that their organization had been successful in the completion of a given community engagement effort, ten of the respondents supplied responses relating to the number of people in attendance, gauging their success by whether that figure was too low or “high enough.” The other nine cited indicators including positive feedback, the incorporation of the public’s ideas in to the final plan, and overall improvement to the end product.

The discrepancy concerning the definition of success in the participation process was a theme carried throughout these interviews. While some respondents were content to measure their success quantitatively, by counting the number of attendees at their meetings or participants in their workshops, others were dissatisfied with a simple attendance number. The planners in the latter group were attempting to gauge their impact on the public engagement process using more qualitative metrics. Two planners spoke to the differences in the measurement of success directly. One respondent, in defending the use of attendance as a metric, said, “Attendance is key. If people do not come to meetings, resources are wasted, which is ultimately worse for everyone involved.” The other practitioner, as he explained why an attendance count is insufficient for determining the extent of the planner’s impact, suggested that visible outcomes are the ultimate test of success. “People know when they are being played; they know when the person in front of them is there simply to check a box. When the public’s participation cannot be seen in the end result, the effort has failed.”

Insights from the Field: On Determining Success

“*Good community engagement in the planning process requires a lot of self-evaluation.*”

The advice offered by those who were critical of engagement as it is currently conducted suggested that practitioners get away from choreographed meetings and scripts. Their reasoning was that people can sense when an event is nothing more than a show. Generally, people are not interested in participating in an aimless step in the process. Again, activities that are included in our interactions with stakeholders must be tailored to the population and project area to which they are addressed.

These sentiments relate to the question of actual outcomes. One respondent suggested that practitioners tasked with engaging the public ask themselves: “Is what [the community says] going to have an impact?” “If not,” this practitioner said, “then do not have a meeting.”

The question of outcomes, though not notably common in my conversations with planners, was significant in instances in which it was discussed. There were three levels of outcomes from community outreach and engagement that were discussed in these interviews: a happy public, improvement of the final product, and community empowerment.

1) A Satisfied Public

A number of respondents were concerned primarily with presenting a final plan to the public without any significant backlash. When asked how they had determined that their outreach process had been a success, one planner said that “people were happy when we presented the end result.” Another responded, “Even if the public didn’t agree, they felt that their ideas had been heard.”

While a final product that does not elicit vocal criticism from stakeholders is a good sign, it still seems to be a slightly shallow indicator of success. Intentional evaluation on the part of the

planner should be carried out to determine actual success.

Asking stakeholders to review the participation process through surveys, interviews, focus groups, or some other methods allows planners to identify weaknesses in their methods and make improvements for future initiatives (Creighton, 2005; Laurian & Shaw, 2008; Roberts, 2004).

2) Improvement of the Final Product

Some interviewees expressed a wish to see the direct impact of community involvement reflected in the final product. Though the majority of respondents who spoke about this outcome admitted that their organization had failed to achieve this goal. One planner spoke to this outcome directly as he claimed, “I was really happy with our outreach efforts because we got an improved product from the exchange. I truly believe that.”

When we talk about community engagement, it is easy to assume that a meaningful impact on the plan itself is the ultimate goal. It is surprising that this outcome was so rarely discussed in this set of interviews.

3) Community Empowerment

By far the least discussed effect of the community engagement process was true community empowerment. This result may have manifested itself because the outcome is highly specific to the project and population in question. It may also be a result of the fact that true empowerment is the most difficult goal to achieve and requires the most time, resources, and dedication. In fact, just one respondent working on a site plan in a small neighborhood explained that she was satisfied with the outreach effort carried out by her organization because they were “promoting the organizational continuity among the participants to make [the project] happen.”

“Have people write down questions and comments so that they are not just speaking them into the world. They need to see that their thoughts are being recorded. Repeat the thoughts in future meetings.”

Insights from the Field: On Promoting Meaningful Engagement

In the end, the struggle in determining the success of community engagement seems to be in achieving a balance in the notion that every voice counts and the very real resource and programmatic constraints that mean that planners cannot satisfy everyone. This is a dilemma that is impossible to address fully but that we should recognize as planning practitioners set forth to organize community engagement efforts.

Conclusions & Recommendations

“The best part is when it’s over.” This was the response of one practitioner when she was asked for her favorite part of interacting with the public. While she quickly clarified by saying, “When it is done, and the information has been shared with those that it concerns,” her automatic response was striking and may summarize a lot of planners’ sentiments toward the engagement process. As is evidenced by these interviews, the proper and complete engagement of the public

“People assume that the problem is with the public and do not ask much about the design of the engagement process itself. The truth is, our methods are stale.”

in the planning process holds a large number of difficult and, often, controversial challenges. It is easy to understand why, despite intentions for meaningful participation, the best engagement event is a finished engagement event.

Insights from the Field: On Finding the Source of the Problem

However, if the community engagement component of the planning process, which

our professional association and, indeed, our political society as a whole deem as one of the primary duties of planners and others who represent the public good, is so difficult, why are we not dedicating more attention to identifying these challenges and addressing their roots? Our profession’s success is dependent on this line of inquiry because, as one of the interviewees in this study astutely asserted, “When one of us [planners] does public outreach badly, all of us pay the consequences.”

Defining Our Terms. One problem that should be mitigated at the beginning of any public participation effort is the definition of “engagement” and “success.” It was apparent that many of the planners involved in these interviews had not clearly defined their terms at the onset. By “engaging the community,” did they mean simply vetting information and assumptions with the public or actually listening and gathering the meaningful input of stakeholders? By “successful engagement,” did they mean sharing their project with a large number of people or developing an improved product as a result of a public learning process? The correct answer to these questions is subjective, but they should be identified before designing a participation process for a given project.

James Creighton suggests that the best definition of success occurs when groups decide whether they plan to evaluate their engagement process or its outcomes. He holds that evaluating participation based on criteria under these two explicit categories will allow practitioners to focus their review efforts and pose the right questions to identify necessary improvements (Creighton, 2005).

Sector Differences. These interviews highlighted another interesting point: There are key sector differences in the way that planners define engagement and success. The outlier is

the public sector. The overwhelming response from practitioners regarding their challenges in engaging the public related to strict boundaries resulting from their representation of elected officials. While most of the practitioners interviewed were encouraged to be creative in the ways in which they involved the public, those representatives from the public sector talked primarily about “strict bureaucracy” and a “maze of hierarchy.” The planners were concerned about not offending stakeholders, explaining that they had to be sure to “construct statements very correctly.” In the end, creativity and going beyond the most basic definitions of engagement, that required by law, becomes too difficult and time consuming. Additionally, these practitioners, who are the ones who repeatedly referred to the need for “thick skin,” just want to complete their jobs without being berated by the public.

Three Types of Community Engagers

There are three types of planners identified through these interviews.

1. Those that are checking a box. These practitioners are involved in a project, likely funded by public dollars, that requires a public outreach component. They follow the guidelines of the requirements, interacting with the public only to the extent necessary and allowable.

2. Those that understand the importance of engagement but are neutral to process. These practitioners want a good product and believe that proper engagement has the potential to improve the outcome of their project. However, they did not demonstrate any strong emotional response regarding public participation or its improvement.

3. Those that genuinely enjoy the engagement component. Finally, there were a small number of practitioners who were excited to talk about their interactions with the public and seemed to have genuinely positive feelings toward the impact that the community can have on a planning project. These individuals were also the ones who had the most ideas about improving the way that we engage Atlanta stakeholders.

There were stark differences in the approaches and challenges described by the three types of community engagers. In talking about the way in which their colleagues in the field

“I always try to put myself in the resident’s shoes. I’m always asking myself: ‘how can I put this in a way that my grandma can understand and then go and share with her friends?’”

varied in regard to their approach to public outreach, many of the practitioners offered a great deal of advice, ranging from the idea that not every person is going to be comfortable with interacting with the public and should not be forced to do so, to “Planners must enjoy getting to roots of the problem as a group and hashing it out.”

Insights from the Field: Empathy & Engagement

Among those that spoke to these differences in approach and attitude toward public engagement, there was a common sentiment: all planners need to do it, and we need to do

it well. Improvement to our processes will require the identification of challenges and proper solutions.

Who is in Attendance?

The most cited challenge in proper community engagement was getting people to participate. However, while they were discussing their scarcely attended community meetings and workshops, few people were interested in who was in attendance. Were they residents? Businesses? Potential investors? In designing a community outreach plan, planners should be explicit and intentional in the segment of the community that they hope to engage, and success of the engagement process should be dependent on whether those populations are included.

Community Empowerment

A few of the practitioners interviewed for this study focused on the empowerment of community residents to implement plans. Should this outcome be the goal of the planner? When is community empowerment as a determinant of success appropriate? These questions should be included in the conversations leading to the design of the engagement approach. Again, planners must be intentional about the motivation for engagement and carry those goals throughout the process. If community empowerment, however it is defined, has been identified as a desired outcome and it is not taking place, planners should reevaluate the situation and take a different approach.

“The planners that are most hesitant about outreach are the ones that already have in their mind what they would like to happen. They fear that someone is going to change it.”

Insights from the Field: On Hesitancy Toward Engagement

Those that were concerned with empowerment had a plethora of advice for planners seeking similar outcomes. The most poignant of these insights was that we, as planners, should embrace our outsider status, candidly stating during initial interactions with the community: “I realize that I do not live here, but I am here to help.”

As she discussed the tendency for plans to be compiled without transition into reality, one practitioner suggested, “Until we treat the community as the ones who will implement the process, these plans will continue to fail to go anywhere.” This statement suggests that there is a strong push for a fundamental adjustment in the way that planning practitioners plan and develop communities.

Open Discussion Among Planners

The inclusion of the public in the designing of plans is fundamental to our jobs. It should, therefore, be at the forefront of our profession. While the schedule for the American Planning Association’s 2013 National Conference in Chicago, Illinois, was lined with sessions dedicated to incorporating technology into engagement to make it “easier” and “more accessible,” there

seems to be little regular discussion on the subject at the local level. Whether it be within individual organizations or among multiple organizations across Atlanta, there should be some organized structure to facilitate open conversations about methods for community outreach and the challenges associated with this element of the planning process. While the planners involved in this study expressed a number of questions and agitations associated with citizen participation, they also had a lot of advice. Making the sharing of challenges and insights from planner to planner a priority may not only help to improve the way in which we engage the public in planning, it may also help to lift overall planner morale, allowing us to do our jobs better.

The Need for Training

The ultimate lesson gathered from this set of interviews was the need for training in public engagement methods and facilitation. Few of the practitioners discussed training on the subject of engagement from their employers of planning schools. Those who did talk about prior training admitted that they were trained simply to get the job done, not in tailoring methods to a given community or in dealing with confrontation and ineffective meetings. While there is a great deal of merit in trusting “experience” to be the best teacher of public engagement “do’s and don’ts,” there are many lessons that can be taught.

One of these lessons is simply speaking to participants in a manner appropriate to their backgrounds and understanding. “Planners are apprehensive of engagement because they are unsure of how to simplify their terms and message,” explained one practitioner. Another planner declared that we have to learn to leave jargon behind and break our “technical lingo” down at the first meeting with participants so that everyone can “move forward on the same page.” Clear communication with participants is crucial because often, those outside of the profession are more confused than helped, and that confusion leads to incorrect assumptions that may lead to the negative community perspectives identified as one of the primary challenges of planning and engagement.

An additional lesson that should be included in any training program for planners is the incorporation of technology into the engagement process. The negativity toward the use of online methods and applications for public participation may be a result of improper use. Every planner should be trained on what tools are available to meet a given need, when their use is appropriate, and how to use these technology tools most effectively.

Limitations & Further Research

The present study was limited by time and resources. As a result, there are aspects that, if improved, may lead to different results. The first of these limitations is the number of planners interviewed. Nineteen participants is a small number for the purpose of identifying general trends. More respondents could lead to the identification of more or different trends in challenges that planners face when attempting to engage the public.

An additional shortcoming of this study was in the researcher’s familiarity with many of the participants. This association may have led to responses that were different from the respondent’s true feelings or that were generalized to avoid identification of specific projects, colleagues, or community members.

This study also highlighted other areas that may be explored in future studies. While the present research focused primarily on the planner’s perspective of the engagement process and its challenges, the perspective of the community and other stakeholders should also be taken into consideration and compared to that of the practitioner. If intersections in the responses of practitioners and participants are identified, those challenges may be stressed as a priority for attention and change.

When asked how he thought the public perception of planners affected practitioners and their work, one respondent suggested that there is, in fact, a hesitancy among planners to engage the public, and that that hesitancy is due to a history of “doing it wrong.” “True public engagement,” he said, “is more fun.” This concept of “fun” in community engagement is intriguing. In fact, just three of the practitioners in this review spoke about fun or enjoyment in relation to the public engagement component of their planning processes. The notion that of a planner’s feelings toward public engagement as an important factor is enticing, but to what extent does that practitioner’s attitude toward community interaction affect his or her ability to carry out the task successfully?

Finally, there was a great deal of talk about personality and one’s ability to engage the public effectively. Does personality matter? If so, to what extent? What personality types make the most suitable planners?

Community Engagement Toolkit

There are tools available to planners that may help to alleviate some of the challenges identified in this study. The table in Appendix I provides a list of some of these tools, their pros and cons, and what resources will be required to utilize them in an engagement initiative.

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Challenge	Approach	Example Tools	Description	Pros	Cons	Resource Requirements
Attendance	Remote Conferencing	WebEx www.webex.com	Online interface that allows presenters to broadcast visual and oral presentations through the Internet through screenshare	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Provides access to presentation for stakeholders who might not otherwise have been able to attend	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Users must have access to computer with speakersDoes not have method for 2-way communication aside from verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Computer with speakers and microphoneTime to download software and setup
		Free Conference Call www.freeconferencecall.com	Online service that allows facilitator to set up free conference call line for up to 96 callers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Optional recordingNo line reservations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Monthly fee for groups with more than 96 users	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Phone
Access	Crowdsourcing & Social Media	Mindmixer www.mindmixer.com	Interface that allows organizations to post topics and receive feedback and ideas from stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Promotes widespread sharing of ideasAllows community to provide feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Monthly organization fee	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Package costsTime to review ideas and comment
		Open Plans www.openplans.org	Online service that assists organizations in creating websites for online engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Able to tailor to individual projectsExpertise in map interfaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fee for service	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Service costsTime to create site, review input, comment, and updateLow-level Technical expertise
		Crowdbrite www.crowdbrite.com	Online service that assists organizations in creating online tools for public engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Provides different tools for varying needs (online meetings, visual idea organization)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fee for service	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Service costsTime to create site, review input, comment, and updateTechnical expertise
		The City 2.0 Thecity2.org	Platform powered by TED that allows users to share stories on urban collective action around the world by theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none">AccessibleInspirational	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Not place or project-specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Internet
		Give a Minute www.giveaminute.info	Online tool that allows cities to post questions and users to respond via posts on an open board	<ul style="list-style-type: none">FreeSimple, easy-to-use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Not yet set up for AtlantaNot directly accessible to non-public leaders or planners	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Time to review and respond to posts
Maintaining Interest	Unconventional Engagement	Tactical Urbanism tacticalurbanismsalon.com	Approach to public involvement that brings issues of community to the forefront by disrupting the status quo and creating incremental change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Provides crucial “short-term success” element	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Need high level of publicity to be effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Designed to be a low resource approachTimeCreativity
		Photovoice www.photovoice.org	Participatory photography activity in which stakeholders are able to share visual representations of their perspective in relation to a given topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Low technological requirementsLow costProvides alternative participation opportunity for those who may otherwise hesitate to speak	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Not everyone may have access to a cameraRequires prior preparation on the part of the participant	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Upfront marketing and organizationExhibit space
	Interactive Polling	Audience Response Systems (ARS)	System that allows audience member to answer a poll via individual keypads	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Keeps audience engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">System can be expensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Acquisition costsTimeMinimal expertise for setup
		Poll Everywhere www.polleverywhere.com	Online tool that allows audience members to answer a poll via text message	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Free (up to 40 responses)Easy to set upKeeps audience engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Must have access to text messaging to participate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Time for set up and testing
	Organized Discussion	The World Café www.theworldcafe.com	Approach to small group discussion with methodical process; site provides online services and support community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ensures that every participant has opportunity to share	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Need training to carry out effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Time for training
Limited Engagement Training & Experience	Training	Neighborworks Training Institute	Organization provides regular online and on-site training for professional development on issues of community development and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Offers training on a variety of topicsAble to complete online or during scheduled “Training Institutes”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fee for coursework & certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cost
	Support	Place Matters www.placematters.org	Nonprofit organization working to provide local governments and other groups with the tools and expertise needed for quality community decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Employ individuals from a spectrum of backgrounds able to assist in a variety of projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fee for service	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cost

Appendix II

Interview Instrument

1. Again, please think about the last community engagement effort in which you were engaged. Please describe, briefly, the purpose of the planning process in which you took part, and what was your role?

2. How did you feel when tasked with organizing this engagement plan? What was your attitude/ approach to engaging these stakeholders?

3. How did people get involved –or- What was the structure of information exchange?

4. What was your favorite part of the experience? Why?

5. Were there any challenges to your experience? What were they?

6. In your opinion, was the overall participation aspect of the initiative successful? Why?

7. What would you have done differently? Why?

8. Does your organization set boundaries? How innovative are you permitted to be? How do you know if you overstep your limit/jurisdiction?

9. Do you have any additional thoughts on the subject of engagement that you would like to add?